
ARTICLES

THE UTOPIAN VIEW OF RURAL TOURISM AS AN EXCLUSIVE BUSINESS: CONSEQUENCES

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There are many examples of management decisions that try to face the dysfunctions resulting from the depression afflicting rural areas, by making use of tourism as a tool against imbalances. This timely decision is often preferred over the choice of structural reforms on rural areas in decline, with possible outcomes in the improvement of production systems, of marketing, as well as in overcoming the technical and sociocultural lag of these areas.

In these context, the aim of this paper is to present the disastrous results of an attempt to turn a rural spot into a tourist destination, after the impractical process of recovering a lagoon on the Cella river (high Jiloca river basin, in Teruel, Spain) which had been drained in the eighteenth century. As such, the new tourist destination, exclusively proposed, faces a double problem. On the one hand, as regards the other economic activities that contribute to the territorial identity of the area, this utopian view threatens the versatility of agriculture, accelerates the expansion of wilderness, and generates hostility among the inhabitants of the natural region around the Cella river, historically deriving from the 'sesma' (an administrative grouping of several villages in the Middle Ages). On the other hand, the development of this new tourist destination merely on the basis of the natural myth does not stand on the necessary steps and lacks the minimum infrastructures required. The project does not clearly define the future specialization of this tourist resort and seems to cling to the vulgar definition of a landscape, as the portion of a territory seen by an observer. Finally, it is well known that endogenous regional development is the proper way for the success of any project of this magnitude, but this utopian enterprise has already generated opposition from locals residents, who claim their right to water as recognized by the Ordinances of 1742, by customary law, by the Spanish Constitution, by the Aragonese Statute and by a large body of jurisprudence. Local residents, encouraged by the legitimacy of their action, have sued the utopian project in Court.

This paper is divided into two sections. In the first one, the reasons that have led to this utopia are studied. In the second one, the situation of enclosed circle in the dialogue between the utopian positions and the perception of territorial identity is analyzed. Proponents of utopia seek to turn the territory into a social product, supported by the

profound changes experienced in the tertiary sectors. Advocates of territorial identity rely on a culture, on a way of perceiving reality, making clear the position of the good father who works for their children to have a better future; they are also legally protected by the code of good governance and the Ordinances of 1742, which guarantee the use of water supplies and the infrastructures for their transportation. Moreover, these Ordinances are an example of equity, a model of transparency, efficacy and efficiency in its implementation by groups of both proximity and strategic actors: respectively, the Curators and the General Board, with representatives from all municipalities.

The reasons for the birth of this utopia can be seen at the confluence of the debate on the catastrophic future of rural areas as overcome by the reiterated virtues of rural tourism. From the official positions, rural tourism seems to be the only possible activity: "the solution to the problems of rural areas will be found largely outside of agriculture". In these circumstances, a dialogue about the utopian or territorial identities arises, which could be described as a dialogue in an enclosed circle: only sustained in making a deaf ear to the new framework for spatial and territorial relations based on good governance practices. As a result, both attitudes are irreconcilable, in view of an excessive and disproportionate positioning of the local and regional governments in favor of the first one. The administration subsidises this project (this being its main purpose), but, at the same time, agricultural practices are accused of surviving merely on governmental grants and subsidies, and the administration claims that this system should be suspended: the old and typical case of double standards in governmental discourse.

The solution to this enclosed circle situation is very simple: to observe and enforce the Ordinances of 1742, which have shown their capacity to resolve conflicts along their long history as a code of good governance. They have also provided local society with real systems of organization, management, arbitration and regulation. As a conclusion, one could claim that tourism as a main factor to overcome rural depression cannot be proposed at any price: it is urgently necessary to reject any dichotomy in the assessment of territory; the generation of a new tourist destination should be envisaged as a global project, and rural tourism can never be seen as a mere alternative but as a complement.